DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 070 CS 210 385

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TITLE Escape Mechanisms: Info and Technique for Black Writers.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Black Attitudes; Black Community; *Black Culture; *Black History; *Black Literature; Drinking; Drug Abuse; *Folk Culture; *Racial Bias; Slavery
IDENTIFIERS *Black in White America; *Black Writers

ABSTRACT

Black writers--through novels, plays, poetry, and essays--described how blacks made use of any available asset or talent to outsmart, out-think, endure, or merely contend with their white oppressors. Some of the survival mechanisms that became standard were (1) religion, (2) ignorance as wit, (3) alcohol, and (4) drugs. Early black poets, such as Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley, suggested that bondage in America was preferable to heathen freedom in Africa, but after slavery, blacks began to question the power of a god that would have let them suffer so. The writings of Fenton Johnson, Margaret Walker, James Baldwin, and Ben Caldwell have indicated that God has become less of a crutch, and two works from the Harlem Renaissance Era (by Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes) reveal that blacks were becoming skeptical of the white man's religion. In "American Negro Folktales," Richard Dorson categorizes the stories told by blacks who played ignorant to outsmart the whites. Margaret Walker and Richard Wright, among others, have chronicled blacks' use of alcohol as a means of forgetting who, what, or where they were, but the trend has shifted to escape through drugs (Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" and Claude Brown's "Manchild in the Promised Land"). Slavery, inequality, and maltreatment have led blacks to resort to any release possible and writers to record these temporary escapes. (AEW)

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Escape Mechanisms: Info and Technique for Black Writers

Because of the ill-treatment of the Blacks ever since their shipment to America, they have been steadily seeking ways of survival and means of enduring the innumerable hardships underwhich they have been forced to live.

Although Webster defines the escape mechanism as a psychological term used to describe a means of avoiding an unpleasant life situation, this definition is only partially true as applied to Blacks. One obvious reason why this is so is because for Blacks there is no rote means of avoiding any unpleasant situations, so it becomes a matter of how to live with such unpleasantries. Thus, Blacks have adopted or made use of certain gimmicks or coping devices -- here referred to as escape mechanisms -- in order to survive as a group. Black writers, being an integral part of this unjustly treated group, probably found it a most difficult task to depict verbally just how the "scapegoat" attempted escape. Yet, numerous artists were successfully able through novels, plays, poetry and essays to describe how the Blacks made use of any available asset, trick or trait imaginable to outsmart, outthink, endure or merely contend with his oppressors. Although it is highly conceivable that each person has his own individual means of survival, there are some mechanisms that become common or standard to a number of Blacks. Among these -- which will be treated in detail based on the writers who make use of them in their works -- are religion, ignorance as wit, alcohol and

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and drugs.

Since with even a little knowledge of the African culture, it can be assumed that the Africans came to America with certain basic beliefs in the powers of the gods, it is natural to believe also that immediately they began asking for deliverance from the bondage underwhich they had been placed. Thus, as is indicated through the lyrics of the earliest spirituals, the captives turned to God for deliverance. Not only through the singing of spirituals did the Blacks reveal their beliefs in one God, but through the earliest known Black poetry as well. J. Saunders Redding in his essay "The Forerunners" names Jupiter Hammon as the first American Negro to see his name in print as a maker of verse. He described Hammon, a minister, as a poet "whose verse is rhymed prose, doggerel, in which the homely thoughts of a very religious and superstitious man are expressed in limping phrases."[1] Hammon, writing about 1760, exposes his belief in one God in the following excerpt from his poem, "An Evening Thought:"

> "Salvation comes by Christ alone,
> The only son of God;
> Redemption now to everyone,
> That love his holy word."[2]

Phyllis Wheatley, who gained more fame as a slave poet, also wrote about her monotheistic beliefs in these lines:

> Father of mercy! 'Twas thy gracious hand
> Brought me in safety from those dark abodes."[3]

Wheatley seems to be grateful for God's having "delivered" her from the darkness of Africa into the enslavement of America, as Hammon also in another work acknowledges the widsom of God in having brought

him from that distant shore. These particular poets serve to show that at least to some slaves, the bondage in America was better than the freedom in Africa, perhaps because (1) they were both privileged or house slaves, or (2) they were convincingly taught that obedience to the earthly and heavenly masters was better than freedom. One very logical reason why they were the first poets in print is because they wrote about the aspects of American life that they were expected to defend -- obedience to both masters and the beauty of life in America. Nevertheless, the omniscient God was present in the works of both of these early writers.

One cannot blame the Blacks of this period for their fervent beliefs in God and the hereafter, neither should they be pitied for having fallen prey to such conniving people, but rather they are to be admired because even then the Blacks had the ability and fortitude to hold on to something that would sustain them and give them some peace of mind. Is it so demoralizing to one's ego now to understand -- knowing some of the conditions of that era -- why our forefathers "felt that Jesus would redeem the void of the living, felt that the more bitter life was in the present, the happier it would be in the hereafter?"[4] Is it not a human, rather than a Black, instinct to want something better? What chance did they have when they were being taught subservience not only by whites, but by their Black religious brothers as well? Both during slavery and afterwards, Blacks were being taught by the puppetry ministers about the life beyond this world, a life in which the color of a man's skin would not matter, a life in which each man would know what was deep down

in the hearts of his fellow man. Thus, religion was and to some, still is, perhaps one of the most widely used escape devices of the Black man.

After slavery, however, when the Blacks could speak somewhat more freely, there seemed to be a question about the power of a god who would let his people suffer so; and the usual answer to this was a reference to how long the Israelites stayed in bondage. Writers at the turn of the century, however, began to ask why and to show doubt about this "God." In the 1920's, in a poem entitled "Nocturne at Bethesda," Arna Bontemps asks,

> "And why do our black faces search the empty sky?
> Is there something we have forgotten? some precious thing
> we have lost, wandering in strange lands?"[5]

He further refers to God as "O quiet one" because neither he nor his people have been receiving answers for all their many prayers. Unlike the former mentioned poets, Bontemps does not praise America and though he talks about an after life, he wants that to be in Africa rather than in this country:

> "And if there can be returning after death
> I shall come back. But it will not be here:
> if you want me you must search for me
> beneath the palms of Africa."[6]

It should be noted here that Bontemps merely poses possible questions without denying beliefs in the God figure. His basic religious philosophies are still obvious in a later work "Miracles" (1941) in which he unites nature, man, and God:

> "And you think Him only man,
> I tell you faithfully
> that I have seen Christ clothed in rain
> walking on the sea."[7]

These two seemingly contrasting aspects of Bontemps are probably indicative of the Blacks from that era to this -- that is the questioning of a supreme power on one hand, yet the acceptance of a god figure on the other.

If the writings of Blacks are exemplary of feelings of the masses, however, their complete and devout faith in God tended to dwindle as the years passed; and He became less of a crutch. Younger writers began to show some of the more obvious fallacies of the church and Christianity. Fenton Johnson talks about letting "the Calvary Baptist Church sink to the bottomless pit," because he is tired of "building up somebody else's civilization."[8] Margaret Walker in "For My People" describes the Blacks as "praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power."[9] James Baldwin goes into even more detail in Go Tell It On the Mountain as he exposes the corruptness of the minister Gabriel (guilty of adultery, lack of morals, etc.), who preaches each Sunday about the pangs of hell if the congregation does not obey the will of God. In an even later work, Ben Caldwell describes his present day minister-leader in a play called "Prayer Meeting or The First Militant Minister," who is, stereotypically, the Uncle Tom who wants to leave everything to God and do nothing to help his people or teach them to help themselves. Although Caldwell uses a humorous approach in which the minister believes an unseen burglar to be God, he very skillfully exposes the minister's riches, lack of concern for his people, and theories of nonviolence as opposed to violence. At the end of the play, however, the minister having spoken to the

burglar-god makes a speech with a gun on top of his Bible.

The aforementioned writings tend to involve a distinct evolution in the Blacks use of religion as a means of escape. Apparently, they realized that whether there is a God or not, they must do something themselves if they are to dispose of the shackles underwhich they've survived for hundreds of years. Two works written by poets of the Harlem Renaissance Era that reveal how Blacks were becoming skeptics of the white man's religion are written by Countee Cullen in "For A Lady I Know" and Langston Hughes' "Cracker Prayer." Both of these works reveal that the whites feel that even in heaven, the Blacks will remain servants. In "Cracker Prayer," the "cracker" asks God for a nigress to polish his golden slippers and a "mammy" that he never had because he was too poor to have one on earth. In "For A Lady I Know," Cullen says,

> "She even thinks that up in heaven
> Her class lies late and snores,
> While poor black cherubs rise at seven
> To do celestial chores."[10]

One reading either of these works would find "the pie in the sky" theory not so enticing.

Even when religion was at its most powerful peak, Blacks made use of a natural talent for enduring -- that of ignorance as wit. Since they were already considered totally void of intelligence, they made use of this ignorance in numerous instances to dupe the masters or simply lie their way out of a seemingly hopeless situation. In addition to a Black's intentional use of this trait, it is even more noteworthy to see how he is able to look back at what has hap-

pened and be able to relate the experience humorously. Richard Dorson, a well known collector of folklore, categorizes in his American Negro Folktales the stories told by Blacks who played ignorant to outsmart the whites. One such grouping is the tales of "Old Marster and John" in which time after time the slave or former slave proves to be much more alert than his master. Perhaps it is the ignorance of the slaveowner that becomes more apparent through the tales, because the typical "John" continually outwits "Mr. Charlie" by simply playing stupid. The John of Dorson's tales, however, is just as witty or informative as Jesse B. Semple of Langston Hughes' folktales. Simple is the everyman of Black literature, and it is through the intelligence of this somewhat unintelligent character that Hughes is able to ridicule most of the ill treatments of Black Americans or reveal their inner-most thoughts. One example of Simple's speaking his mind is found in "Census" when Simple tells the census taker, "My mama should have named me Job instead of Jesse B. Semple. I have been underfed, underpaid, undernourished, and everything but undertaken -- yet I'm still here."[11] Simple, amid chronic complaints and very pronounced dialect, discusses everything from the bars in Harlem to Black women, from religion to politics and knows enough about each and any subject to relate practical ideas to the uneducated as well as the elite. In discussing how Simple came about, Hughes states that "it is impossible to live in Harlem and not know at least a hundred Simples, fifty Joyces, twenty-five Zaritas, a number of Boyds, and several Cousin Minnies -- reasonable facsimiles thereof."[12]

Not all of the tales of the Blacks' use of ignorance as wit are as humorous as those of Dorson's John or Hughes' Simple because Richard Wright's remembrances of those who staged ignorant roles were of those who did so in life or death situations. In his "Ethnics of Living Jim Crow," an autobiographical essay prefacing Uncle Tom's Children, he describes the do's and don't's of the Blacks under Jim Crow conditions; and one do included remaining oblivious to what a white did to a Black. He cites an instance of his seeing a Black woman's being beaten by two store owners for not paying her bills. When she came out of the store stumbling, she was arrested for being drunk. His role was to act as if he had seen nothing. When Wright mentioned the incident to some friends, they remarked, "Shucks! Man she's a lucky bitch ... Hell, it's a wonder they didn't lay her when they got through."[13] It took Wright many other shocking lessons other than this incident and this statement from a fellow Black to learn that only through playing unaware of certain situations around him could he survive. Thus, ignorance or a simple turning of the head to life as it existed seemed to serve as a device for saving the lives of countless Black Americans.

Another escape mechanism which writers explore is the fervant use of alcoholic beverages as a means of temporarily forgetting who, what, or where they are. For the most part, writers describe, not the scientific effects that alcohol has on the human body, but the soothing effect that it gives a man who has labored in the hot sun all day or the deadening effect for the one who has just been lashed or beaten. Hughes' Simple talks about liquor in a humorous way,

"Drink took to me ... Whiskey just naturally likes me but beer likes me better. By the time I got married I had got to the point where a cold bottle was almost as good as a warm bed, especially when the bottle could not talk and the bed warmer could."[14] On a more serious tone, Margaret Walker describes the "happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something -- something all our own..."[15] Yet, for some Blacks, alcohol evidently gave peace of mind, and everything else became secondary. Fenton Johnson depicts such a person in his poem "Tired" in which the character, talking to his wife, is tired of working and building up a civilization for the whites. He is thus ready to give up everything and he says,

> "I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and sleep the rest of the night on one of Mike's barrels.
>
> ...
>
> You will spend your days forgetting you married me and your nights hunting the warm gin Mike serves the ladies in the rear of the Last Chance Saloon."[16]

One connotation of the "Last Chance Saloon" could possibly be that the beverages in this tavern are his last chances or final hopes for any contentment. In other words, in his final attempt to cope, he plans to escape from the pressures surrounding him through alcohol. Bigger in Native Son does something similar; over a bottle of whiskey, he calmly tells his girlfriend Bessie about the crime that he has committed. In this instance, the alcohol gives him the courage to face what he had done. Wright best describes Bigger's motives for drinking by giving an over-all picture of why Blacks drink. In his essay "How Bigger was Born" he says,

> "I was in a world in which millions of men lived and behaved like drunkards, taking a stiff drink of hard life to lift them up for a thrilling moment, to give them a quivering sense of wild exultation and fulfillment that soon faded and let them down. Eagerly they took another drink wanting to avoid the dull, flat look of things, then still another, this time stronger, and then they felt their lives had meaning. Speaking figuratively they were soon chronic alcoholics, men who lived by violence, through extreme action and sensation, through drowning daily in a perpetual nervous agitation."[17]

For some, as it is with Bigger, this description by Wright is far from being figurative; and the drink referred to is life, but alcohol as well.

With the flux of drugs into this country, the trend of escape through alcohol seemed to shift to the escape through drugs. Writers revealed this escape, too, as they discussed the drugs or hallucinogens which block out all interaction between the self and reality, all under the heading of "escape." Ralph Ellison, in the prologue to Invisible Man, describes an experience with marijuana that allowed him to completely forget himself and transcend through music to its depths. When he comes back to reality, he comments, "to see around corners is enough... But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action."[18] Unlike Ellison, Claude Brown in Manchild in the Promised Land goes a few steps further into the drug scene -- sniffing cocaine and shooting heroin. Yet, like the character in Invisible Man, Brown returns to reality and attempts to make the best out of a life which at one time seemed almost hopeless.

So, the yolk of slavery, the bonds of inequality, and the noose of maltreatment have led the Blacks in America to resort to any available release possible and the writer to record such. None of the

escapes are permanent, but they do afford temporary relief for a people who can still only ask, "Why?"

End Notes

[1] J. Saunders Redding, "The Forerunners," Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 60.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. XIII.

[5] Arna Bontemps, "Nocturne at Bathesda," Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 423.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Arna Bontemps, "Miracles," Dark Symphony, eds. James A Emanuel and Theodore Gross (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 480.

[8] Fenton Johnson, "Tired," Black Voices, p. 370.

[9] Margaret Walker, "For My People," Black Voices, p. 459.

[10] Countee Cullen, "For A Lady I Know," Black Voices, p. 386.

[11] Langston Hughes, "Census," Black Voices, p. 106.

[12] Hughes, "Who is Simple?," Black Voices, p. 97.

[13] Richard Wright, "Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Uncle Tom's Children (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 9.

[14] Hughes, "Feet Live Their Own Life," Black Voices, P. 100.

[15] Wakder, "For My People," Black Voices, p. 459.

[16] Johnson, "Tired," Black Voices, p. 370.

[17] Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Uncle Tom's Children, pp. XIX-XX.

[18] Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 15.